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Effect of New Tactics on Infantry Troops on Modern Battle-Field

Artillery has played so conspicuous a part in all recent operations of European armies in maneuvers as well as on battle-fields that a singular delusion notes the Paris Gaulois, has grown up lately respecting present-day tactics. It is taken for granted that infantry has been displaced as "the king of battle." There could be no more egregious delusion. Artillery, indeed, says the military expert who discusses the topic in our military contemporary, remains strangely helpless by itself on the field of battle. It accomplishes nothing independently, a statement that cannot be made of cavalry. Those who attach such importance to artillery in modern war, who go so far as to regard it as "the king of battle," know nothing, our authority says, of military operations as a science. War may, no doubt, be an "art," to the romantic novelist. To the soldier it is the most exact of sciences and no more convincing truth exists for him than that in real war infantry is supreme. In battle, it is the infantry which conquers the field, which conducts the battle and in the end decides its destiny. All the revolutions in equipment, every invention in the domain of ordnance, confirm the sovereignty of infantry.

Tactics have, indeed, changed. Gone forever are the solid lines of troops ranged like a wall, deployed in wings or in battalions, and hurling themselves upon an enemy drawn up in like fashion. Nor are modern troops trained to fire volleys simultaneously or in any recognized order. Since the invention of rapid-fire guns of long range, the infantry must abandon its old regularity and precision in the ranks.

"Infantry no longer advances along the field of battle in step nor by any conventionally organized movement. It seems to wander aimlessly, in fact, it scatters and dissipates itself in units as much as possible. The troops crawl apart along the ground. They 'sneak' over and around the undulations of the soil. Infantry nowadays may be seen separating itself into little bands of men more or less compact, more or less separate, who, taking advantage of the slightest shelter, disappear all at once to allow a shot to pass through their ranks. The men, flat on their stomachs, their faces close to the ground, turn their backs perhaps to the shells shrieking in a storm above them. Then, when the least pause occurs in the firing, these men leap up for a minute, hurl themselves forward not as a body but individually and independently in bounds and begin afresh their hugging of the ground.

"The fire of these men is intermittent and irregular. It can be heard but it cannot be seen. It breaks out here in a sudden volley that lasts for seconds only. A reply from the enemy, a preparation for another haphazard bound forward—and that is all. It is the particular business of the artillery to protect this forward progress and to reduce to silence the batteries of the enemy busily striving to impede it. As for the rifles, they are of no particular use yet except to help clean up a little of the ground just ahead. If they suffice to pick off a few of the enemy's sharpshooters, so much the better. If not, they are not fired lest they serve to reveal a foe and to provoke a reply. There

is the time enough for their use in a little while when the men are face to face."

Meanwhile, on the battle-field, plowed up by projectiles, little serpents are spitting fire. Were we nearer they would be regarded as groups of infantry preparing to follow those ahead. In the rear are other groups more or less thick. One would suspect that they are enormous pythons. Then arrives the moment when the fractions of the first line, unable to advance further without the support and aid of their weapons, leap up, come together and form a long line which is lit up from end to end. Those who follow hasten their pace and press close-up behind those in front until they are lost in the long line. The rifle-shots ring off. The artillery defends. The critical moment has arrived. If the men fail to hold firm, if great gaps are torn in their long line and if these gaps be not at once filled up, if a happy counter-attack be made good, all is over—at least for that time. There must be a retreat, and this retreat is equivalent to an abandonment of that particular effort.

And now come up the reserves who as yet have been held under shelter. They race forward. They shoot down the necessary number of the enemy and by their timely intervention restore confidence and military ardor. Their separate fractions, their rapidly individualized units, push from the rear forward, impelling the combatants already in the zone of fire further ahead. These combatants are already excited by the sight of their object immediately in front and by their knowledge that the moment for a supreme effort has come. Now the din is formidable. There is a steady roar of the artillery to create a tempest. There is a shriek of exploding projectiles each second. There is a snapping of rifles, a hiss of bullets. Every sound blends with every other to precipitate the pandemonium of hell. The time has come for sanguinary sacrifices and for heavy loss of life. Happily this period is the briefest of all, for the climax is preparing. A last volley from the troops, a last rush pell-mell of the men in a crowd, a rapid making ready of the bayonet for its thrusts, a simultaneous roar from the artillery finding the true range for the smoking pieces, a dash of the cavalry from cover emitting the wild yell of victory—and the assault is delivered. The brave men spared by the shot and shell will plant their tattered flag on the ground covered with the corpses of the defeated enemy.

"Such is the part played by infantry on the field of battle today. It is a combination of courage, of devotion, of indomitable will; but there must likewise be experience and knowledge of the soldier's business. A regiment well organized, well disciplined and well officered which, knowing its ground, can take advantage of its surface methodically and with coolness, will suffer infinitely fewer losses than one, no less brave but less well trained, education, which should be highly scientific. Hence the well-trained regiment will face the obstacle presented by the enemy with a more complete cooperation."

It will be noted that the artillery has no other function than that of aiding the infantry in everything. By itself artillery, despite all recent inferences from the Balkan war, is absolutely helpless, impotent, useless. Artillery has no other mode of action than mere fire. It never of itself and by itself decides the fate of a battle, because to decide that fate two things are necessary which artillery lacks; conquering mobility and the capacity to give shock. Its action is not indeed the less valuable and indispensable on these accounts. Artillery shatters obstacles, it spreads terror, it overwhelms from afar. A powerful artillery is thus essential. Without it the best infantry would be destroyed on the battle-field. This explains why as its effect grows more destructive its numerical relation to an army increases continually. In the time of the great Napoleon it sufficed to supply three pieces of artillery for every thousand men. Today this proportion is almost trebled. In the latest of all European wars, the Balkan peoples were wise to sustain their young soldiers with artillery as numerous as it was formidable.

We have seen that infantry no longer operates in the old "mass" formation. Artillery, on the other hand, has abandoned its former independence. It acts in "mass"—a great departure from tradition.

"Grouped in the 'park,' artillery concentrates its fire upon a point to be attacked, either to silence the enemy's batteries or to overwhelm his menacing infantry. The moment the battle is on, the action of artillery is two-fold. It must not only destroy the enemy's position but also cover its own infantry with adequate protective fire from the time of the first advance of the foot soldiers until the actual final assault—inclusive. It is for the commanding officer to decide what proportion of the pieces shall be assigned to one or the other of these objects.

"The devotion of the artillery must be carried to the last limit. It matters little that it be overwhelmed itself provided that it can protect the infantry until they arrive at their destination.

"Thus the artillery—the intervention of which at every stage of a battle must be incessant—runs very great risks. It possesses, however, a precious moral advantage. Amid the shower of shot and shell, all the men are occupied. The infantryman has at moments his cruel anxiety when, motionless under fire and waiting for the signal to advance, he receives a ball without being able to reply to it. This terrible test—which may, if prolonged, prove too severe for the bravest of the brave—is spared the artilleryman. He serves his gun, devoting all his time and attention to it. The horror of the actual field of battle he does not experience and, his mind being on something else, is not disconcerted by it. That is why panic, spreading at times among the most heroic infantry, so seldom affects the artillery."

The new tactics tend more and more to throw responsibility upon the individual soldier in the ranks. The artillery protects the advance. The cavalry pursues the defeated foe that he may not have time to form his lines anew when driven from the field by a supreme assault, which the infantry alone can deliver.

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